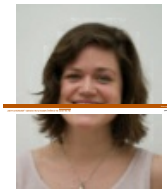
Is pursuing an academic career a form of “cruel optimism”?



What does the future hold for PhD graduates? ***Marie-Alix Thouaille*** *has found that for many the post-PhD transition is characterised by exploitative, often unsustainable working conditions, emotional upheaval, financial worry, and poor wellbeing. Despite this most PhD graduates remain absolutely determined to forge an academic career, unwilling to even entertain the idea of working in another sector. This paradoxical condition can be seen as a type of “cruel optimism”, with early-career researchers remaining attached to the fantasy of the academic “good life” despite a precarious lived reality. This may be attributable to the culture of doctoral training which centralises academic careers as the “norm”, devalues other career paths as “alternative”, and views leaving academia as “failure”.*

As a doctoral researcher nearing submission, I often find myself anxiously wondering about my post-PhD prospects. What does my future look like? What kind of job will I have? Where will I live? What will it feel like to finally be “PhinisheD”?

One way to answer these questions is to look at existing data on postdoctoral employment. In my disciplinary home, the arts and humanities, doctoral graduates have been heavily “affected by changes in the labour market”. Indeed, “a faster-rising proportion [are] employed on fixed-term contracts, especially on short-term contracts,” and there are “higher levels of portfolio working compared with other disciplinary groups”. While this data is crucial to understanding post-PhD career paths in my discipline, what it doesn’t tell us is what it *feels like* to be employed in this way.

My placement project with Vitae, where I conducted a survey investigating the professional development of arts and humanities early-career researchers, provided answers of sorts. The free-text responses, in which respondents described their post-PhD transitions, powerfully resonated with me precisely because of my own personal investment in these questions.

In what follows, I draw on the data published in my report, “One size does not fit all” (2017), to sketch out the post-PhD experiences of arts and humanities PhD graduates whose employment is precarious: unaffiliated researchers, hourly paid lecturers, teaching fellows, and research fellows. In a nutshell, for many, the post-PhD transition was characterised by:

- Exploitative contracts (e.g. fractional, fixed-term, zero-hours, etc.)
- Conducting research unpaid, reliance on savings or family support
- Limited access to career development support or funding
- Emotional upheaval, sense of abandonment, poor wellbeing
- Financial worry
- Liminal experience, lack of direction
- Uncertainty of long-term prospects, difficulty with life-planning
- Perception of “failure”, reluctance to “give up” a long-held ambition.

What struck me both in the data I collected and in subsequent conversations with my peers, is how many of us remain attached to the idea of an academic career despite significantly compromised conditions of possibility. In other words, despite critiquing exploitative and often unsustainable working conditions, few of us seem able to entertain the idea of looking for work in another sector.

This paradoxical condition, whereby “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” is known as “cruel optimism”. Under “cruel optimism”, affect theorist Lauren Berlant argues, good life fantasies which give your life meaning or enable you to “add up to something” also impede upon your wellbeing. In this case, the optimistic attachment to the pursuit of an academic career is life-giving (giving doctoral researchers and graduates a goal to work toward, a reason to get up in the morning) and simultaneously damaging (because it turns out the neoliberal university does not much care about its casualised early-career workers). In this way, the dream of the academic “good life” functions as “enabling object which is also disabling”.

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My key contention here is that arts and humanities academic research thrives on cruel optimism, in part because of the reliance on the idea that academics are motivated by passion rather than financial reward. As Angela McRobbie has shown, discourses of “passionate work” function as a “disciplinary mechanism for tolerating not just uncertainty and self-exploitation but also for staying unprofitably” employed within particular sectors. In academia specifically, Rosalind Gill argues, our attachment to a “myth of what we thought being an intellectual might be like” works to “bind us more tightly into a neoliberal regime with ever-growing costs, not least to ourselves”.

That arts and humanities doctoral researchers and graduates remain attached to the fantasy of the academic “good life” despite a precarious lived reality may seem puzzling. Why not seek work elsewhere? Why persevere in what is already not working? This continued attachment, I suggest, hinges partly on the current culture of doctoral training; a culture which centralises academic careers as the “norm”, devalues all other career paths as “alternative”, and thus gets away with providing little or no provision in this area. This cultural devaluing also means that where such provision exists, it is often poorly taken up due to a perception of “betrayal” or “failure”. As one doctoral researcher in English literature notes:

> “There are currently a few optional services which help students to think about careers outside academia, but because leaving is viewed as such a failure, people often actively tell you not to go, or that it’s a waste of time. Moreover, if you do go, your supervisors seem to think this means you’re not committed to academia, or as if it’s a reflection on them, and they act really shocked and surprised, as if you’ve betrayed them.” (*One size does not fit all,* 28)

(Though, as is implicit in Erin Batram’s recent piece, “The Sublimated Grief of the Left Behind”, it is the sector that is betraying individual researchers, and not the other way around.)

“What do research staff do next?” (2016) provides valuable insights here. This report shows that the perception that leaving higher education research is a “failure” acts as a significant barrier to individuals considering a career change. That “What do research staff do next?“s sample was dominated by STEM subjects, and comprised of only 6% of arts and humanities respondents, suggests that this pernicious perception exists across disciplines, even though industry career paths are arguably more straightforward in certain STEM fields.

But for those who do manage – however painfully – to detach from the fantasy of the academic good life, there is some good news. The Australian report “Tracking Trends in Australian Industry” (2017), for example, suggests that there is a significant “hidden job market” for PhD graduates. The Canadian 10,000 PhD project similarly claims that “the specialized knowledge and skills obtained from advanced degrees can be successfully transferred to a broad range of professional contexts even within a challenging job market”. Both the upcoming “PostAc” TM app and the recently launched humanities-focused Imagine PhD platform promise to enable PhD researchers and graduates to explore alt-ac and post-ac job opportunities.

Meanwhile, “What do research staff do next?” goes on to suggest that postdocs who leave academic careers for other sectors or non-research careers within higher education are highly satisfied. While 78% aspired to academic careers while postdocs, only 18% would now go back. Though this statistic is telling in itself, it’s unclear how far it applies to arts and humanities PhD graduates given the survey sample’s STEM bias.

In the end, I’d argue that too little is known about arts and humanities PhD graduates’ career paths, how happy they are in their jobs, or even how relevant their PhD experience is to the jobs they eventually secure to satisfactorily answer my initial question: “what does my post-PhD future look like?” Much more work is needed in order to improve our understanding of postdoctoral career paths, and, in turn, to meaningfully support career diversity across disciplines.

You can download “One size does not fit all”, the full report into arts and humanities doctoral and early-career researchers’ professional development, and “What do research staff do next?“, the report on careers of research staff who have made successful transitions to other occupations, from the Vitae website (free registration required).

This blog post is an updated version of that which originally appeared under a different title on the All the Single Writing Ladies blog and is published here with permission.

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About the author

Marie-Alix Thouaille *is a CHASE-funded doctoral researcher at the University of East Anglia (UEA). Her doctoral research explores representations of authorial labour within the contemporary “single woman author film”. As part of her CHASE studentship, Marie-Alix undertook a placement project with Vitae investigating the professional development of arts and humanities doctoral and early-career researchers. She blogs about her research at mariethouaille.wordpress.com and tweets @legomarie.*

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